HEADLINE: Village Health Workers provide primary health care to rurals, but Coronavirus stalls their progress.

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QUOTE: “Despite these vital functions, the numbers of VHWs and the role played by VHWs has diminished over the past two decades in Zimbabwe due to lack of incentives, supporting resources and protective equipment. VHWs are often undersupplied for PPE and because of the 'corona fear' the VHWs are extra worried about their own safety as there is a serious shortage of protective gears such as PPE and masks,” says Itai Rusike. (CQ_Rusike)

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NARRATIVE LEAD

Murombedzi, Zimbabwe_ On a normal day, Bernard Mhondiwa a Village Health Worker (VHW) (CQ_Source sheet) rides his black bicycle, door to door, conducting on spot health checks (CQ_Mhondiwa). His role is to ensure primary health care service is provided to the villagers. From baby weighing to post-natal care, Mhondiwa does it all. (CQ_Mhondiwa)

The 51-year-old father of five has been a village health worker since 2001, serving people in his community is his passion. (CQ_Mhondiwa)

“My mother was a Village Health Worker and l was motivated to follow her path, after seeing how she was making a difference in the community,” he says (CQ_Mhondiwa)

But with the advent of the Coronavirus, the tall slim man has stopped conducting door to door visits and group meeting for fear of contracting the virus. (CQ_Mhondiwa)

This has had an adverse effect on the villagers who rely on Mhondiwa (CQ) for health care needs. (CQ_Mhondiwa)

NEWS VALUE

Zimbabweans who live in rural areas get health assistance from VHWs chosen by the community and trained to provide health promotion interventions and perform health related duties within their communities. (CQ-Research+Sources)

They have neither formal certification nor tertiary education. But with the beginning of the coronavirus and subsequent lockdown VHWs face challenges providing these services and this has affected villagers who rely on them**.** (CQ-Research+Sources)

CONTEXT, BACKGROUND INFORMATION AND STATISTICS

According to a report by the Ministry of Health and Child Welfare, (CQ_LINK) The Village Health Worker programme in Zimbabwe dates back to 1981. The country was amongst the first in Africa to implement the initiative espoused at the Alma Ata Conference of 1978 (CQ_LINK)

“The role of the Village Health Worker is therefore to, educate individuals and communities on health related issues, health promotion and disease prevention thus increasing health literacy. More specific roles include treatment of minor childhood illnesses and adult ailments at community level, provision of education on breast feeding, nutrition and immunisation ….”among others states a UNICEF, World Health Organisation and the Ministry of health and Child Care report (CQ_LINK PG 4)

The report (CQ_LINK), also suggests that, villagers are likely to take heed of the advice they get from people they are familiar with. As such, in the past years the VHW programme has recorded successes in the reduction of preventable and communicable diseases including increased antenatal care bookings, institutional bookings and other successes. (CQ_LINK)

However, a research by BMC Health Services research (CQ_LINK) states that the use of VHW has also been muddled in controversy, with

concerns of, “ poor incentives, lack of opportunities for career advancement, and potential exploitation of predominantly poor and female volunteers,” (CQ_LINK). The research further states that the health workers are at risk of becoming demoralised when they face difficult situations faced by their clients.

LOCAL VIEWPOINTS

Oscar Munyoro a 45-year-old man (CQ_Source sheet) who is HIV positive says he has been relying on Mhondiwa (CQ) for his medication for the past four years.

“I easily get my Cotri [Cotrimoxazole] tablets from Mhondiwa but since the pandemic Mhondiwa (CQ) does not have the tablets l need, l have to travel over 30km to collect and sometimes l fail due to money issues and this has been affecting my well-being,” he says.

He isn’t alone.

Mhondiwa serves people in three villages with a total of 146 families all relying on him.

Eveline Marimo (51) (CQ_Source sheet) a mother of five has just given birth to her fifth child. She says throughout the birth of her children she has always received support from Village Health Workers.

“On my last three children l have always relied on Mr Mhondiwa (CQ) to assist me throughout the pregnancy registration, giving birth and postnatal care,” she says. (CQ_Marimo)

Marimo (CQ) says many people in her area due to cultural beliefs were not so keen on giving birth at clinics but VHWs have,” opened our eyes,” she says.

Since the lockdown started, Marimo (CQ) says the service from Mhondiwa (CQ) has not been the same due to the Corona Virus fear. (CQ_Marimo)

“l have had to forgo baby weighing for months because the Village Health Workers are not conducting home visits, and the tablets such as pain killers that we easily got from Mhondiwa have run out and we have no way of accessing them,” she says. (CQ_Marimo)

Baby weightings are recommended monthly for children under five years to ensure that they are growing up well.

Advocates

Itai Rusike, the Executive Director, Community Working Group on Health (CWGH) (CQ_Source sheet) says in a low resource country such

as Zimbabwe, health professionals are a scarce resource and to attain universal health coverage, “we are working with Village Health Workers as they are playing key roles at community levels to support the prevention, detection and contact tracing efforts in the COVID-19 crisis,” he says. (CQ_Rusike)

“The VHWs approach has been one of the innovative approaches to address the resource scarcity especially in the health system,” adds Rusike. (CQ_Rusike)

In a bid to assist VHW, Rusike (CQ) says their organization is training VHWs on Covid-19 as trusted sources of information for community literacy and to support case tracing. (CQ_Rusike)

“Despite these vital functions, the numbers of VHWs and the role played by VHWs has diminished over the past two decades in Zimbabwe due to lack of incentives, supporting resources and protective equipment. VHWs are often undersupplied for PPE and because of the 'corona fear' the VHWs are extra worried about their own safety as there is a serious shortage of protective gears such as PPE and masks,” he says. (CQ_Rusike)

LANGUAGE: Linda Mujuru translated some interviews from Shona to English.